

Pepco prepares for winter

Published on: Thursday, October 28, 2010

By Spencer Broughten

Assuring vulnerable customers are not forgotten during future power outages was the main topic of discussion when Pepco officials and members of the Montgomery County Council met in a joint council committee work session last Thursday.

The meeting included the members of the county's Public Safety Committee and Health and Human Services Committee, as well as representatives from Pepco, Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service and the county Department of Health and Human Services. Discussion focused on the extent to which Pepco should be expected to notify and prioritize power restoration for citizens with special life-supporting electrical equipment, like respirators or kidney dialysis machines, during prolonged outages.

Councilmember Nancy Navarro (D-Dist. 4) said she called for the meeting after hearing concerns from constituents about the several storm-related outages last summer and about what might happen to vulnerable citizens during potential power disruptions in the winter months.

"People are just trying to figure out how do we operate under this almost new normal," Navarro said.

Pepco process manager Donna Mann said residents that rely on life-support equipment carry a higher weight than regular citizens in their power restoration priority process. Mann also explained the Emergency Medical Equipment Notification Program that Pepco offers, which gives special-needs customers updates and reminders about approaching severe weather and scheduled outages. About 370 Montgomery County residents are currently signed up for the program, Mann said.

Pepco President Tom Graham said the utility company's first actions after a large-scale outage center on restoring power to the transmission lines that service the largest number of customers and to facilities for which power is most essential, like hospitals, assisted living centers and water treatment plants.

"Couldn't Pepco play a more proactive role in helping people suggest how to prepare for this?" Councilmember Marc Elrich (D-At Large) said. "It seems that between evacuation and figuring this out by yourself in a moment of crisis, there ought to be something else that maybe could happen."

Graham replied with a suggestion that the county address individual residents' needs while Pepco focuses on restoration of service after major outages. Any additional outreach to individual customers would distract from overall restoration efforts, Graham said.

"As a utility, we can't provide emergency resources, emergency services. And that's something that the county does on a daily basis," Graham said.

Elrich then mentioned the Maryland Public Service Commission's August hearing where it was revealed that Pepco's service reliability ranks in the bottom quartile among the country's energy companies.

“This is a collective responsibility ... but your failure to provide decent, reliable service puts a burden on us to fill the gap,” Erlich said. “It would be nice if that was a shared burden to fill the gap.”

“Believe me, we’re going to improve service reliability on a day-to-day basis,” Graham said. “There’s nothing more important to us right now than improving our reliability of service for all of our customers.”

Near the end of the meeting, a possible compromise of sorts emerged that involved Pepco gaining consent through its notification program to provide the information of vulnerable customers to the county.

“In an emergency, the county can augment what Pepco’s able to do in such a situation,” Councilmember Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) said before proposing that the county could call customers with special needs as a potential outage-causing event approaches and make sure they have appropriate emergency measures in place.